DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 066 PS 021 568

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TITLE School Transitions among Youth at Risk for Substance Abuse.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. on Drug Abuse (DHHS/PHS), Rockville, Md.
PUB DATE Mar 93
CONTRACT DA04022
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (60th, New Orleans, LA, March 25-28, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *High Risk Students; High Schools; *High School Students; *Intervention; Junior High Schools; *Junior High School Students; Longitudinal Studies; Middle Schools; School Orientation; *Student Adjustment; *Substance Abuse
IDENTIFIERS *Middle School Students; New Students

ABSTRACT

Using data from a larger intervention study of youth at risk for substance abuse, this study examined the impact of school transition on middle school and high school youth at high risk for alcohol and other drug abuse. Subjects for the larger study were 279 students from 30 secondary schools; approximately 10 students from each school were identified as high risk for substance abuse and participated in the intervention program. Data were collected three times: in the fall and spring of 1987, and in the spring of 1988. Between the 1987 and 1988 assessments, 46 youths transitioned from middle school to high school, i.e., from eighth to ninth grade. Of these students, 30 changed schools and 16 remained in the same secondary school. School transition effects were examined by comparing the group of students who changed schools between eighth and ninth grade with the group of same-aged students who did not change schools. Assessments for the intervention study included measures of behavioral coping skills; self-reports of behavior, attitudes, and substance abuse; grades and school attendance; and teacher ratings of behavior. Analysis revealed no significant differences between the school transition group and the chronologically similar comparison group. Subjects' participation in the intervention program prior to school transition may have had some preventive utility relative to school transition. (MM)

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ED 361 066

School Transitions Among Youth at Risk for Substance Abuse [1]

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The transition from one school to another necessitated by the organizational structuring of school systems has been studied as a significant stressor of young adolescents. Several developmental studies following youth through one or more school transitions have suggested that the transition may be associated with declines in self perception of well being and in school performance (Crockett, Petersen, Graber, Schulenburg, & Ebata, 1989; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Almost all of the research on this topic has included what might be considered samples of "normal" youth. Virtually no studies have examined the effects of school transition for youth considered at high risk for less than optimal behavioral and social outcomes.

Transition to a new school is a multifaceted phenomenon. In many cases the transition precipitates significant disruption in peer social networks due to the integration of students from multiple feeder schools along with assignment to multiple classrooms and teachers. Frequently the new school is considerably larger than the pre-transition school presenting a number of cognitive, behavioral and social tasks for new students. Simmons & Blyth (1987) have suggested that the impact of school transition varies with the age of the youth and the number of other transitions (e.g., biological, social)

PS 021568

[1] Paper presented at the 60th annual meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, March, 1993. This work was supported in part by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (DA04022).

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occurring simultaneously.

The transition to a new school may be stressful in that it presents new challenges. For at-risk students and those whose performance is less than satisfactory, the transition may exacerbate the effect of prevailing risk factors or, as crisis theory might predict, create the opportunity for an alternative developmental trajectory. The new school setting may provide an opportunity to redefine one's role, experience some relief from a past history of problems and the inevitable negative peer and teacher expectations. To further understand the effect of school transition research opportunities need to be identified in which some of the factors associated with the transition (e.g., biological changes, school size, introduction of ability-grouping) can be unconfounded and high-risk groups can be studied.

The data reported in this paper are drawn from a larger intervention study of middle school and high school youth at high-risk for alcohol and other drug abuse. Students from thirty schools in seven school districts were involved in the intervention study (Forman, Linney, & Brondino, 1990). The organizational pattern of the schools allowed the identification of two subgroups of students all the same chronological age in which one group of students transitioned to a new school at the end of the first year of the intervention study and the second group of students did not. The two groups available for comparison are similar in chronological transitions (and theoretically biological/pubertal status) but one group did not change schools as they progressed to the next grade providing an opportunity to unconfound school transition from chronological/developmental transitions.

Method and Results

Students

Data to examine the impact of school transition were extracted from an earlier study of the efficacy of three interventions for the prevention of substance abuse among middle school and high school youth (Forman, Linney & Brondino, 1990). The intervention study involved 279 students from 30 secondary schools in a two county southeastern metropolitan area. The participating schools included every high school in the seven districts and every middle school in six of the districts. Thus the intervention sample includes both rural and urban sites and the full range of socioeconomic levels. Students participating in the intervention were identified as at high-risk for substance use by school personnel, parents or self referral. High risk status was defined as the presence of two or more of the following risk factors which have been shown to be correlated with adolescent substance use: a) high number of disciplinary incidents, b) low grades, c) high numbers of unexcused absences, d) drug or alcohol use by most friends, e) drug or alcohol abuse by family members, f) low self-esteem, g) social withdrawal, h) experimental alcohol or other drug use. Approximately 10 students at each school were identified as high risk. The intervention sample was 74.5% white, 24.1% black (4 students identified as hispanic or Asian). Fifty-seven percent of the students reported living with both parents. The mean grade point average for the intervention sample at the time of initial assessment was 1.44. Three quarters of the students reported some experimentation with illegal substances, although students reporting daily use of alcohol or marijuana or getting drunk more than twice a week

were referred for other services and not included in the study.

Data were collected at three time points, in the fall and spring of 1987, and in the spring of 1988. These assessments represent two time points pre intervention and one post. Between the 1987 and 1988 assessments, 46 youth in the sample transitioned from middle school to high school, i.e., from eighth grade to ninth grade. Thirty of these students (in eight middle schools) changed schools, moving to a new building which included at least two feeder schools. Sixteen students (in five different schools) attended schools which combined the middle and high school grades or a rural middle school which alone transitioned to the high school across the street. This naturally occurring configuration allowed a comparison of school transition separated from chronological/biological transitions.

Assessments for the intervention study included five types of measures, 1) assessments of behavioral coping skills in response to videotaped vignettes of problem situations, 2) self report of assertiveness, self esteem, locus of control, social anxiety, rebelliousness and attitudes toward school; 3) self report of substance use; 4) archival data on school performance including grades and school attendance; and 5) teacher ratings of behavior using the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) (see Forman, et al (1990) for a description of the measures).

Analysis of School Transition Effects

School transition effects were examined by comparing the group of students who changed schools between 8th and 9th grade (N=30) with the group of same-aged students who did not change schools (N=16). Table 1 shows demographic data for the

total sample transitioning from 8th to 9th grade. The sample is predominantly white and male representing the full range of socioeconomic levels. Youth in the sample presented on average more than five risk factors known to be correlated with adolescent substance use. Comparisons between the transition and no-transition group did not reveal significant differences on the demographic and risk status variables (Table 2).

Data were available from two time points in the pre transition year and one year later (post transition). Group by Time (2 x 3) repeated measures analyses of variance were computed, in which the group by time interaction was expected to reflect the effects of a school transition. There were no significant group by time interactions for the five indices of behavioral coping skill, assertiveness, self esteem, social anxiety, use of alcohol, marijuana or tobacco, grade point average, school absences, or teacher ratings of behavior. Although not statistically significant, there were small mean increases on the self esteem variable for both groups (Table 3).

Discussion

The absence of significant differences between the school transition group and the chronologically similar comparison group suggests that for these youth the transition to a new school did not have appreciable effects either positive or negative. In general the findings from these analyses are inconsistent with other examinations of school transition effects in not evidencing declines in self perception or school performance related to the school transition. Several aspects of this sample make it different from the samples most often studied. First, much of the school transition literature has reported on suburban, middle class school populations. The data reported here represent a more extreme

group behaviorally defined as at-risk and drawn from several school districts. Given the especially low level of school performance, early initiation of substance use, and anecdotal evidence of other risk factors in the lives of these students, it seems that moving to a new school may be a relatively minor event for them. (Interestingly the mean level of self reported assertiveness, social anxiety, self esteem and self confidence are comparable to more population-based samples using the same measures (Botvin & Eng, 1982)).

As Simmons & Blyth (1987) have suggested, urban/rural location and school size may be important moderating variables to examine. About half of the schools in this sample would best be described as rural. The remaining schools while locally seen as urban, are situated in an urban area of less than a half million people. The middle schools in the sample range in size from approximately 500 to 1200 with the high schools ranging from 1000 to 2000 students. Students transitioning from a middle school to a high school did not experience more than a doubling in the size of the new school. In light of the classification systems typically used in research on the effects of school size, the schools in this sample are best characterized as small to medium. In this size range, the disruption to peer networks and anxiety generated by the size and complexity of the physical plant may not be sufficient to precipitate long-lasting declines in self perception and performance.

The timing of assessments to detect transition effects is another significant issues. In this study, the post-transition assessment was conducted in the last quarter of the academic year. Most transition studies have examined effects in the first part of the

school year, when the effect of change may be most evident. As the literature on school transitions grows, it will be increasingly important to distinguish among short and more long term effects in multiple domains.

The transition examined in these analyses was between eighth and ninth grades, two years later than the most commonly studied age of transition. Perhaps this second transition is less likely to precipitate declines in performance and self perception. In most cases the transition from elementary to middle school presents the greatest change in school context and peer groups. Without earlier developmental data for this sample, it is not possible to determine whether this high-risk group fared more poorly at the earlier transition. Further the small sample size limits analysis of other mediating variables or sub-group analyses.

On several variables examined here there are significant decrements post transition for both the transition and no transition groups, e.g., grade point average. The similarity in decline across both groups examined here, raises some interesting questions about the role of developmental changes versus a school transition as precipitating events. As schools begin to modify their organizational structures in response to the need for curriculum change and other reform, other natural comparisons of the effect of developmental and organizational structure variables may be available. Many rural school districts have consolidated buildings reducing the number of transitions for students, while other districts have increased transitions by clustering a single grade in one building to achieve desegregation goals or optimize the use of instructional resources. These differing patterns provide important comparisons for research on the

impact of school transitions.

Another significant feature of this sample is the fact that all students had participated in an intervention prior to the transition point. The analysis of intervention effects showed significant increases over time for all groups on the self reported social and personality variables, as well as increases in school grades and attendance. It may be that the coping and support intervention in the year prior to a school transition had some preventive utility relevant to the school transition. Unfortunately, without an untreated comparison the role of the intervention with respect to school transition effects cannot be determined. However, given the consistent finding in the literature of decrements in school grades and self esteem, there may be some efficacy in such an individual-level preventive intervention.

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Table 1

School Transition High Risk Subsample (N=46)

Gender:	63% male	
Ethnicity	87% Caucasian	
	13% African-American	
Pre-transition age:	Mean = 13.5 years	
Family Living Situation:	Mother and father:	65.2%
	Mother only:	23.9%
	Father only:	2.2%
	Neither parent	8.7%
Risk Status:	Mean # of risk indicators:	5.45
	Median = 5 risk indicators	
	Range: 2 to 11	

Socioeconomic Status:	Father's job	Mother's job
Higher Executive/Administrative	28%	11%
Clerical Sales	8%	26%
Skilled Manual	24%	0
Machine Operators	20%	30%
Unskilled (includes homemaker)	16%	33%
Unemployed	4%	

Table 2

Demographic Variables by Transition Group

		Transition Group		
		School Change[a]	No School Change[b]	X^2
Gender	Male	60%	69%	ns
	Female	40%	31%	
Ethnicity	Caucasian	83%	94%	n.s
	African-American	17%	6%	
Mother's Education	High School	47%	19%	n.s
	College	13%	25%	
	Graduate/Professional	20%	25%	
	Don't know	20%	31%	
Father's Education	High School	43%	31%	n.s
	College	10	25%	
	Graduate/Professional	20%	6%	
	Don't know	27%	37%	

Notes: [a] N=30 [b] N=16

Table 3

School Transition High Risk Subsample (N=46)

Group Means for Grade Point Average:

	Pre Transition 1	Pre Transition 2	Post Transition
School change[1]	2.04	2.01	1.70
No School change[2]	1.23	1.45	1.38

Group Means for School Absences (previous 30 days):

School change	1.07	1.17	1.27
No School change	0.20	0.53	0.67

Group Means for Frequency of alcohol use:

School change	1.96	2.18	2.28
No School change	2.53	2.37	2.37

Group Means for Frequency of Marijuana Use:

School change	1.65	1.54	1.85
No School change	1.56	1.62	2.12

Group Means for Frequency of Tobacco Use:

School change	3.00	3.17	2.87
No School change	3.00	2.94	3.31

Group Means for Self Esteem:

School change	3.55	3.52	3.61
No School change	3.47	3.54	3.71

Group Means for Self Confidence:

	Pre Transition 1	Pre Transition 2	Post Transition
School change	3.52	3.57	3.53
No School change	3.25	3.43	3.54

Group Means for Social Anxiety:

School change	3.10	3.25	3.34
No School change	3.37	3.26	3.27

Group Means for Social Assertiveness:

School change	3.40	3.32	3.39
No School change	3.26	3.21	3.38

Notes: [1] N=30 [2] N=16